

'Bitesize' Project Archive 1514 – Lord Moran

Charles Wilson, 1st Baron Moran - MC, MD, FRCP 1882-1977 (Pocklington School 1894-1899)

“Shortly after 8 a.m., Sir Winston died at his home.”



Standing outside Churchill's house in January 1965 his old friend and physician, Lord Moran, gave the news to the world of Sir Winston's death. This momentous announcement brought to an end a remarkable relationship between patient and doctor that had begun in May 1940 when, just days following Churchill's appointment as Prime Minister, Charles Wilson accepted the post of the PM'S personal physician. From that moment the two men were rarely apart as Charles rescinded all his other medical duties to accompany Churchill around Britain and the world.

Early years

Of Irish ancestry and born in Skipton where his father was a GP, Charles McMoran Wilson entered Pocklington in 1894 as a boarder, leaving in 1899. He had wanted to become a writer but was finally persuaded by his father that this was too precarious a career and so in 1902 he went to St.Mary's Medical School. In his early days there, medical studies apart, he combined his love of two things to great effect. Firstly, he satisfied his literary bent by becoming editor of the St.Mary's Gazette. Secondly, he was able to continue and indulge his passion for rugby. He captained the 1st XV from wing forward, where his play was described by contemporaries as that of a "typically wild, untiring Irishman." But it was also with skill as at this time the side was a first class club, always having current internationals in its ranks.

After qualification he was appointed medical registrar. Within a few years he joined the RAMC and went to France, attached to the Royal Fusiliers. His experience of trench warfare affected him profoundly. Fascinated with factors that seemed to determine whether men carried on or broke down, he kept notes which, in the 1930s, he used in lectures to the armed forces entitled "The mind in war". These notes and lectures formed the basis for his book in 1945 *The Anatomy of Courage*. He became one of many OPs to win the MC on the Somme (1916) and this was added to in 1917 with the Italian silver medal for valour in a trench raid and he was also twice mentioned in dispatches. In the last year of the war he was posted to Boulogne and put in charge of the allied hospital of 500 beds. Here he was

able to add to his earlier notes by studying a consecutive series of 1,500 mustard gas casualties. He was again concerned with what was going on in men's minds and came to believe that a man of character in peace was a man of courage in war. Immediately following the armistice he went to Cambridge to continue research on mustard gas poisoning. While there he met and fell in love with Dorothy Dufton, a research assistant and later to become a well-known scientist in her own right. Also from Yorkshire, Dorothy was educated at Leeds High School before studying medicine. They married in 1919 and had two sons.

St.Mary's

Returning to St.Mary's he was, in 1920, appointed Dean and held the post until 1945. He at once set out to convert a declining educational institution into one of the finest medical schools in the country. He reorganised the teaching, extending it to Paddington Infirmary. He won government funds to establish full-time clinical units. Scholarships were set up and he then contacted Headmasters to attract the best candidates he could find. In addition to any intellectual ability he liked students who were good at rugby. The entire medical school was rebuilt and a large sports ground was acquired.

The Health Service

By the late 1930s he was looking for challenges beyond St.Mary's. He increasingly started to articulate his thoughts on how medicine was structured in the country. He had long thought health care should be delivered by some form of government health service. Shortly after war broke out he was elected President of the Royal College of Physicians. Here, his gifts as an orator were added to skill in administration and courage to pursue courses that were not popular and he was soon in conflict with the BMA over the future direction of healthcare. But he negotiated skilfully both with them and the Ministry of Health, acquiring in the process the nickname "Corkscrew Charlie", mutual respect developing between him and Aneurin Bevan, the post-war minister of health.

The Churchill years



Not always popular with many of those close to Churchill, including political figures and the military, Moran (he was created Baron Moran in January 1943) saw his patient as the greatest Englishman since William Pitt and managed his care accordingly. His duties included not only waiting on Churchill at 10 Downing Street but also travelling with him on his many long, tedious, uncomfortable and dangerous wartime journeys to Cairo, Moscow, Washington or wherever. He was in a very hot seat as the PM had various illnesses and dealing with them and

Moran by the artist Annigoni

also the press required steadiness and skill. He was privileged therefore to have a front row seat at the making of history and contemporary commentators and historians say, decades later, that we are lucky that it was this man who filled the seat. Often regarded as a cold, remote and stubborn figure, his life was marked by an almost Puritanical commitment to honesty, to facing facts squarely and by an unwillingness to play the game of medical and media politics even at cost to his career.

Whilst Churchill was alive, Moran was totally discreet about his health but fifteen months after his patient died he published an account of his long association with him – *The Struggle for Survival* - including descriptions of his illnesses. He also included, without permission, accounts of conversations he had had in his professional capacity with the cabinet secretary, military personnel and politicians in the war years. The publication of the book and its part serialisation in the *Sunday Times* caused a sensation, the ripples from which continue even today. But Moran had never courted popularity or lacked the courage to do what he thought was right. He was convinced there was a contribution to history that only he could make. His final comments were that he believed he was right to write the book, that he had written it with Churchill's knowledge (though not his family's) and that he hoped his book, by describing what Churchill was really like, could also enhance his reputation.

The picture that emerges from Moran's account only adds to our admiration of the wartime leader. What we see here is a man stretched to the limit, dealing day by day with matters of global imperative, driving himself on without rest and – unlike us who have the benefit of hindsight - he does not know the story will come to a victorious conclusion. Through Moran's writing in *The Struggle for Survival* we see the sheer wear and tear of human life at the nerve centre during our country's finest hour:



Courage is a moral quality; it is not a chance gift of nature like an aptitude for games. It is a cold choice between two alternatives, the fixed resolve not to quit; an act of renunciation which must be made not once but many times by the power of the will. Courage is willpower.

We can only catch our breath for our good fortune that these pivotal years were recorded by such a clear-eyed observer.

Moran and Pocklington

The School magazines from the 1890s carry little information about Charles Wilson. His name does not appear on the short lists of those playing cricket and other sports and academic news is almost solely confined to those obtaining Oxbridge scholarships. But from

the time he arrived at Medical School in London to his death more than seventy years later he maintained good links with the School. His friend Percy Simner (later Sir Percy) was a co-founder of the OP Association in 1897. Much of its early activity was based in London where many dinners were held to which Charles often went along. When he had become “famous” he was frequently asked to speak at these and commemorative events in Pocklington.



Standing.—E. J. Edwards, T. F. Mayfield, J. D. Karran, C. M. B. Skene, J. D. Proven, C. C. Prost, G. H. A. W. Brown, F. G. L. Gribble, E. R. Tucker, R. E. Abbott, G. R. Guy, M. H. Ogle, F. M. Jones.
Sitting.—A. S. Duncan Jones, Lord Moran, P. C. Sands, The Headmaster, Sir Percy Simner, F. G. Swindell, H. A. Pearson, O. L. Prowde, H. M. Brice-Smith, R. Brice-Smith.
Far Table, far side.—B. H. Wray, E. Halliday, C. Giovetti, S. Weeden, J. H. Thompson, S. G. Bach.
Far Table, near side.—S. M. Atkinson, N. Banister, G. M. Bruce, F. B. Brierley, C. J. Haworth.
Near Table, far side.—H. Healey, A. L. McMillan, G. C. Wood, R. A. Alford, T. W. Pay.
Near Table, near side.—R. W. Anmand, G. R. Bull, F. H. Potter, C. D. Kettlewell.

1948 London OP reunion

For example, in 1948 he proposed a toast to the School and in his speech pointed out how difficult it was to predict what direction a pupil would take in later life. The elements of chance and personality were important factors and he illustrated this point by reference to Alexander, Wavell and Churchill. The former PM was irritated by examinations but delighted by songs and poetry. Impressions of Pocklington which persisted were Mr Hutton, the biceps of Mr Mason Clarke (the gym master), the endless calls of corncrakes at night, the beauty of sunrise on Sunday mornings, in the trees – the rooks – whose numbers were reduced at intervals by Stewart (this reference is to Major Percy Stewart, one time big game hunter and Deputy Headmaster and of Burnby Hall fame), the level crossing too, for was it not there that one wistfully used to watch the trains moving off to York? These might seem trivial things but they were none the less vivid. He added that changing times and governments brought special difficulties for Public Schools but that Pocklington had gone far on the right road. Much of this success was due to Mr Sands who found the School a hulk and left it a well-equipped vessel.

After a long and hugely fulfilled life which was also often turbulent Lord Moran died in 1977 aged 94.